

UNDERSTANDING SCALES AND CAPTURE RATES FOR POINT-SOURCE CARBON CAPTURE TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT

SUMMARY

The priority of the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Fossil Energy and Carbon Management (FECM) is reaching the administration's goals of a fully decarbonized power sector by 2035 and net-zero U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Accordingly, FECM invests in research, development and demonstration (RD&D) projects to reduce the cost, increase the efficacy and advance the deployment of commercial-scale point-source carbon capture technologies in the power and industrial sectors, coupled to permanent storage. FECM is developing technologies that can attain steady-state gross carbon capture efficiencies of 95% or higher.

In advancing the readiness of a carbon capture technology for commercial deployment, a series of RD&D projects are commonly completed that have increasing levels of scale, system integration and operational realism.

Typically, small-scale projects are first completed in the laboratory, followed by mid-scale pilot projects in a controlled operational environment and finally full-scale demonstration projects in an actual, commercial, operational environment. Prudent investment of limited RD&D funds requires that costs be minimized by designing projects where research objectives are achieved at the least expensive scale and operational environment. Accordingly, the scale of a pilot or demonstration project is frequently less than what would be required to capture carbon from all of the host facility's emission sources.

Photo: Petra Nova Carbon Capture Facility

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RIGHT SIZING THE SCALE OF CARBON CAPTURE RD&D PROJECTS

For point-source carbon capture technologies, pilot- and full-scale RD&D projects are frequently conducted at an existing commercial plant. To cost-effectively meet the research objectives of a pilot-scale test, a project is usually sized such that only a small fraction of the plant's gas stream emissions is used.

For example, at a fossil-fueled power plant with multiple combustion units, the volume of flue gas from a single unit will typically exceed what is needed by a pilot project to validate the technology's maximum steady-state gross carbon capture efficiency, typically 95+%. Accordingly, only a slipstream, or fraction, of that flue gas would be utilized for testing. For highly modular technologies, a slipstream may even be sufficient for full-scale demonstration projects.

Right sizing these projects to treat slipstreams enabled their RD&D objectives to be achieved at a much lower cost than treating all the flue gas from a single unit or the entire facility.

As shown in Figure 1, two additional commercial demonstration projects have been proposed for the KM-CDR process. These additional projects will continue to reduce cost and performance risks during commercial deployment by further increasing the scale of CO₂ capture, perhaps culminating in the treatment of total facility emissions.

INTERPRETING CARBON CAPTURE RATES

The extent to which a carbon capture system removes CO₂ can be expressed in many ways. The calculation can be made on a gross or net basis, and the scope can be limited to the capture system itself or be broadened to encompass the entire host facility. Life cycle analysis (LCA) can also be used to factor in the effects of upstream and downstream emissions beyond the boundaries of the host facility. (For example, see [Best Practices for Life Cycle Assessment of Direct Air Capture with Storage](#) and the [Carbon Dioxide Utilization LCA Toolkit](#).)

Some commonly used measures for quantifying the extent of carbon capture include:

- **Capture system's steady-state gross carbon capture efficiency (%)** – the gross quantity of CO₂ that the capture system is designed to remove at steady-state conditions, expressed as a percentage of the total CO₂ in the gas stream that is processed through it. For example, in a multiple-unit facility, the capture system may process only the gas stream emitted by a single unit, or even a fraction (slipstream) of the gas stream emitted by a single unit. This metric is the most commonly cited way to express the extent of carbon capture achievable by a given carbon capture technology. Note that the processed gas stream could be only one of multiple gas streams emitted by the host facility.
- **Capture system's steady-state gross carbon capture rate (kg/hour, tonnes/day or tonnes/year)** – the gross quantity of CO₂ that the capture system is designed to remove when operating at steady-state conditions over a given duration of time.
- **Capture system's steady-state net carbon capture efficiency (%)** – the net reduction in CO₂ emissions at steady-state conditions, expressed as a percentage of the CO₂ in the gas stream that is provided from the host facility for treatment. Net metrics account for scenarios in which additional CO₂ emissions are generated to produce (or replace) the energy (e.g., electricity, steam) consumed by the capture system. For example, if a combined heat and power (CHP) system is used to energize a carbon capture system, emissions from the CHP system should be factored into the net reduction of CO₂. Alternatively, if carbon capture is applied to a power plant, and that power plant is derated to energize the capture system, CO₂ emissions associated with generation of power to make up for the derate should be factored into the net reduction of CO₂ emissions.
- **Capture system's operational net carbon capture efficiency (%)** – the net reduction in CO₂ emissions during actual operational conditions over a given duration of time, expressed as a percentage of the CO₂ in the gas stream that is provided from the host facility for treatment. The carbon capture efficiency for an operational environment may be different than that for steady-state conditions due to a variety of factors, including part-load operation, off-design performance and outages (planned and unplanned). The extent of the difference will depend on the type of capture technology (e.g., solvents, sorbents, membranes), the design of the capture system, and its operational strategy for a given load profile.
- **Facility-wide measures** – Any of the above measures can also be computed for the entire facility. However, when reporting facility-wide metrics, one should note whether the capture system was designed to treat all, or only a portion of, the gas streams emitted by the host facility.

As an example, Figure 2 illustrates how some of these metrics are calculated for a slipstream demonstration project.

Confusing the above measures of carbon capture efficiency can lead to misunderstandings. For example, if a capture system processes only a fraction of a facility's emissions, one may erroneously conclude that the capture system is underperforming if they mistake the facility-wide carbon capture efficiency for the capture system carbon capture efficiency. Likewise, one may erroneously conclude that a carbon capture system is underperforming if the operational net carbon capture efficiency is mistaken for the steady-state net carbon capture efficiency.

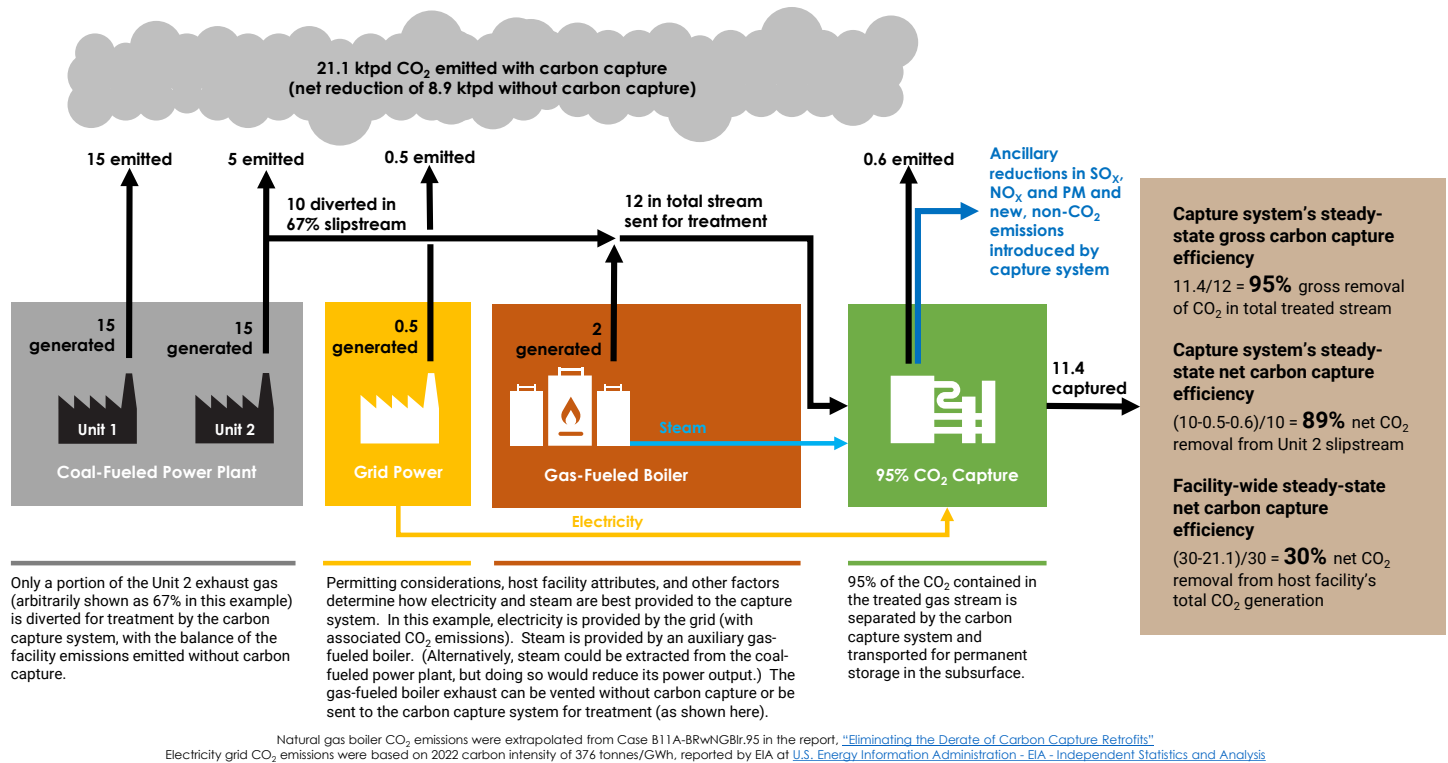


Figure 2: Carbon capture efficiencies for a slipstream carbon capture demonstration (example CO₂ flows shown in kilotons per day [ktpd]).

OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER

Depending on the type of gas stream treated, environmental controls, and the type of carbon capture technology used, the application of carbon capture can decrease or increase emissions of non-CO₂ pollutants within the plant boundary. In some cases, carbon capture can increase water consumption and/or create new solid or liquid waste streams within the plant boundary.

One example is amine solvents, which are used by many carbon capture technologies. Amine systems typically include a pretreatment scrubber that reduces the concentration of sulfur oxides in the gas stream – often to 10 ppm or less – prior to removal of CO₂. The scrubber may also remove nitrogen oxides and particulate matter that would otherwise be emitted by the host facility. However, amine systems can introduce new types of environmental emissions, such as fugitive liquid and gas amine emissions and emissions of amine degradation products. Various design features can be employed to reduce the magnitude of such emissions.

The addition of carbon capture could also result in environmental impacts outside the plant boundary due to the supply chain of inputs to the capture system. These impacts can be quantified using life cycle analyses.

NETL is a U.S. Department of Energy national laboratory that drives innovation and delivers solutions for a clean and secure energy future. By using its highly skilled innovators and state-of-the-art research facilities, NETL is advancing carbon management and resource sustainability technologies to enable environmental sustainability for all Americans.

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